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SUBJECT: NRW Election Chess Game II: Ruettgers Castles His Rook

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¶1. (U) Summary: North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) Minister-President (M-P) Juergen Ruettgers, tried to quickly mend political damage from his party's financing scandal by announcing February 23 his close advisor Andreas Krautscheid as the new NRW Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Secretary-General, the chief organizer of his re-election campaign. Ruettgers' speed in naming a replacement for Hendrik Wuest, who took the hit and stepped down February 22 (see reftel), indicates recognition of the increasingly serious situation that he and the party are in following the revelations of the past weekend. The mood in the election campaign in NRW has shifted dramatically in just a few days, opening up the real possibility of a loss by the CDU- Free Democrats (FDP) governing coalition. End Summary.

Krautscheid Takes One for the Team

¶2. (U) Ruettgers named Krautscheid to succeed Wuest following a financing scandal that has thrown the CDU's election campaign for the May 9 state parliament elections into disarray. Krautscheid, a long-time close confidant of Ruettgers, will, in effect, take a leave of absence from his post as NRW Minister for European and Federal Affairs to take up the management of the CDU campaign. He had been talked about as first in line to become the new floor leader of the CDU parliamentary group in the NRW state parliament after an assumed election victory. His focus now becomes salvaging the CDU's chances of staying in power.

¶3. (U) Krautscheid (49) has had extensive political experience at both the state and national levels, as well as a seven-year stint as a senior manager in the private sector. He started his political career at national CDU headquarters in Bonn, where he served as deputy national spokesman in the early 1990s before being elected to the Bundestag in 1994. Although a freshman, he quickly made a name for himself as a combative debater in parliament and as a member of the so-called "pizza connection" in the Bundestag, a group of young CDU and Greens parliamentarians who regularly met informally to exchange views. (Note: Other CDU members of this unusual group were Norbert Roettgen, now Federal Environmental Affairs Minister, Hermann Groehe, now national CDU Secretary-General, and Armin Laschet, now NRW Integration Minister. End note.) After narrowly losing his re-election bid in the wake of Kohl's defeat in 1998, Krautscheid worked in the private sector, before Ruettgers made him NRW chief government spokesman in 2006 and appointed him to his cabinet in 2007, where he quickly became one of Ruettgers' closest associates. (He just recently accompanied Ruettgers on his snowed under trip to the U.S.) Groehe welcomed Krautscheid's new appointment, calling it a "wise decision," and terming him a "trump card in the election campaign."

How Bad is the Damage?

¶4. (SBU) News of Krautscheid's new job spread quickly on Tuesday evening. At an event in Duesseldorf, the CG talked with a senior official at the NRW State Chancellery, who confirmed that the mood around the M-P's office was severely affected by the four-day-old scandal. He believed the M-P was unaware of the sale of appointments, but thought the M-P's proclaimed ignorance would not help with the voters. This scandal, he said, has grabbed the public's attention to a degree others have not: it boils down to the credibility of the state's top elected official, access, and money at a time of sustained economic hardship. Our source also said that the public mood is turning against the M-P, noting that he listened to a radio call-in show that morning where callers were railing against the apparent fact that wealthy donors had easier access to Ruettgers than the average citizen. Those around the M-P believe that if the CDU does not end up back in the government after the May election, this scandal would unquestionably be the event responsible for the loss.

Comment

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¶5. (SBU) Comment: The mood surrounding this upcoming election has changed quickly from one of presumed easy victory for the CDU-FDP coalition to one of the CDU in crisis, with the expectation that anything is now possible. Ruettgers' pulling of Krautscheid from his cabinet duties to run the campaign represents the next move in the election chess game for the CDU, as the M-P tries to salvage his re-election chances by bring one of his closest, most experienced and media-savvy allies to the center of the game. For her part NRW Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Hannelore Kraft is keeping a low profile so far as she prepares for her party's election convention this weekend, letting the affair take its own course. New polls on the election are expected towards the end of this week or early next week. Important will be how the CDU and the FDP - now at about 6% -- fare. If they show a dramatic drop, 2-4% or so, for the CDU (currently hovering between 36-41% in the polls), the possibility for a change in the governing coalition in NRW becomes real. The NRW elections are widely viewed as a litmus test for the national CDU-FDP coalition, which has gotten off to a rocky start with no real improvement in sight. A loss of a CDU-FDP majority in NRW would mean not only a loss of a CDU-FDP majority in the Bundesrat, but would be seen as a political blow to the national coalition. End comment.

¶6. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
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